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Hybrid return-to-work setup not guaranteed for Alberta public servants

By **Adam Toy** • Global News

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Alberta Premier Jason Kenney speaks at a news conference in Calgary on March 3, 2022. **Global News**



Three months after [Alberta Public Service](#) (APS) employees had to be fully vaccinated for COVID-19 or be subject to regular rapid testing, the vaccination policy for non-partisan professional government employees has been dropped.

“Effective March 1st, the policy which required either proof of vaccination or a rapid antigen test has been lifted for the Alberta Public Service,” Alberta Premier [Jason Kenney](#) said Thursday at an unrelated news conference.

On Sep. 15, 2021, the province announced a vaccination policy for public servants, requiring them to be fully vaccinated by Nov. 30, 2021, or take part in regular rapid testing.

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APS told Global News 95 per cent of its workforce had been fully vaccinated and “the policy has served its intended purpose.”

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“Two per cent of the APS workforce participated in testing while the policy was in effect,” an emailed statement from APS read. “Employees on a variety

of approved leaves make up the remaining three per cent.”

It noted there has been turnover within the public service, but there is no indication whether the vaccination policy drove any resignations.

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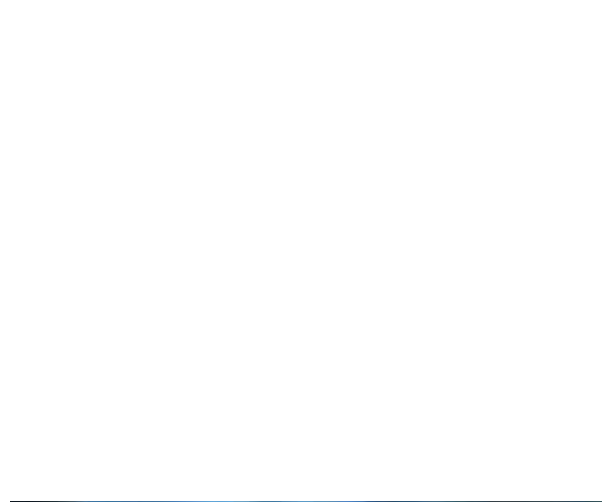
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“As well, the clerk of the Executive Council, who oversees the Alberta Public Service, has issued an instruction for people to return to work but on a hybrid basis, which means that their managers will work out opportunities for people to continue to work from home on a limited basis if it does not diminish productivity,” Kenney said.

APS said the new hybrid work policy could allow people to work from home for up to two days a week.

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The return to offices mirrors other workplaces across Alberta, after the province's work-from-home mandate was lifted Tuesday.

But the hybrid arrangement isn't guaranteed for the roughly 5,000 public servants set to return to government offices across the province.

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AUPE is the union that represents many APS employees.

“Each department is responsible for creating their own hybrid office working-from-home (arrangement), but not every staff will have that option available to them,” AUPE vice president Susan Slade told Global News.

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“They will have to apply to work a hybrid schedule and then their managers will determine if they qualify to do that.”

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Paired with the dropping of the mask mandate and the provincial government's determination to reopen the economy in a bid to move the

COVID-19 pandemic to an endemic phase, the threat to the health of union members is a concern for Slade and the AUPE.

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“There are (AUPE) members, and Albertans for that matter, that are disabled, immunocompromised — they’re at more risk now because there’s no safety measures,” she said.

“We have to think about those that are unvaccinated as well. They’re at a greater risk to possibly have severe symptoms from catching COVID.”

“The employer has an onus to ensure a safe worksite. But they also can put in policies and take away policies and that’s what again, we are just going to be making sure that members are feeling safe and secure when they go back into those offices.”

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1:55

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Alberta's first day of eased COVID-19 health measures – Mar 1, 2022

The premier believed the APS can be “more productive” as a result of the change.

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“People have accommodated the work-from-home requirements for office work over much of the past two years, but you lose something in terms of team-building, culture and probably productivity as well, if everybody is permanently working from home,” Kenney said.

“I hope and expect that as soon as possible, we’ll see those government office towers back with productive public servants.”

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Slade said studies have shown improved productivity as a result of work-from-home orders and public servants have had to go above and beyond through trying circumstances.

“Just like everybody else, they have experienced a level of burnout. There’s a lot of short staffing, especially our court clerks. There’s been a definite increase in job duties that they have, and they’ve received no extra staffing to help alleviate some of those the issues that are happening there,” she said.

On Tuesday, [details of a draft directive to eliminate the vaccination policy for AHS employees](#) were made public.

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Alberta government wants to end COVID-19 vaccine mandate for health-care workers – Mar 1, 2022

At Thursday’s news conference about continuing care funding, the premier said the government is working with AHS to examine the current policy requiring health-care workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

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But he claimed the transmissibility argument to be moot.

“If there continued to be evidence of a meaningful difference in transmissibility between vaccinated and unvaccinated staff, then we would be fine with AHS continuing the policy. But there is no such evidence about a meaningful difference in transmissibility between vaccinated and unvaccinated,” Kenney said.

[In a prior interview](#), Dr. Christopher Mody, head of the department of microbiology, immunology and infectious disease at the University of Calgary, said fewer symptoms correlates to being less transmissible.

Dr. Cora Constantinescu, a pediatrician and infectious disease specialist at Alberta Children’s Hospital, said pre-print studies of the Omicron variant showed “vaccinated people have lower infectious viral loads and then they are less likely to spread it, and also for a shorter period of time than the unvaccinated.”

“There is powerful evidence about the efficacy of the vaccines in preventing severe outcomes like hospitalization and death. And that’s why we urge everybody who’s not yet vaccinated to get the shot and to step up for their boosters if they haven’t got that yet,” the premier said.

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